

Ketchum City Council

Public Comment

September 15, 2025 City Council Meeting

Why Ketchum Should Restore Its Own Police Force Now

I respectfully urge the City Council to restore Ketchum's own police force and discontinue the current contract with the Blaine County Sheriff's Office. A carefully managed transition, effective January 1, 2026, as recommended by city staff, would ensure continuity of staffing, employee benefits, and operational capacity, minimizing disruption for both residents and personnel.

The rationale is grounded in public safety, accountability, and community integrity. For years, the Ketchum public has requested this change. While previously unheeded, recent council and mayoral acknowledgments underscore its urgency.

1 Proven Success: Ketchum's Pre-2009 Police Model

Before 2009, when Ketchum still had its own police department rather than contracting with the Blaine County Sheriff's Office, the downtown street experience had a very different feel. Residents and visitors often describe it as more personal, visible, and neighborly:

- **Foot and Bike Patrols:** Officers regularly walked the sidewalks and rode mountain bikes through the downtown core. This gave them a visible presence not just as enforcers of the law, but as part of the town's daily rhythm. People would see the same officers multiple times a week and get to know them by name.
- **Approachability:** The style of policing emphasized conversation over confrontation. Officers stopped to chat with business owners, greeted families, and sometimes even gave directions to tourists. The relationship was more like a small-town neighbor than a distant authority.
- **Preventive Atmosphere:** The constant, informal contact meant that small issues—noise, loitering, early signs of conflict—were often diffused before they escalated into bigger problems. Officers knew who was struggling, who was new in town, and which kids might need guidance.
- **Integration into Community Life:** The police department was seen as part of Ketchum's civic identity, like the fire department or city hall. Events downtown often had officers participating, not just supervising. Their presence wasn't "outsourced"; it was woven into the local fabric.
- **Tourist Reassurance:** For visitors, seeing uniformed officers moving naturally on bikes or on foot created a sense of safety without heaviness. It fit Ketchum's reputation as a mountain resort town where life was both vibrant and relaxed.

In short, pre-2009 Ketchum policing had a community-police intimacy that matched the town's size and spirit: visible, personal, proactive, and neighborly. After the shift to county coverage, many locals have complained of a more distant, vehicle-oriented, almost militant style where residents become suspects rather than citizens and neighbors to be protected, which feels less connected to Ketchum's own identity.

2 Building Trust Through Community Policing

Effective policing in a small town depends on daily familiarity and trust. Local officers are neighbors, coaches, and fellow community members. Regular interactions at schools, parades, fundraisers, and recreational events naturally build trust.

Outsourcing to a county sheriff's office dilutes this intimacy. Ketchum residents deserve officers who know them personally and are accountable to the community first and foremost.

3 Proactive, Preventive, Community-Focused Policing

A local police department anticipates problems before they escalate. Ketchum faces unique challenges, including seasonal tourist surges, ski and festival crowds, and short-term rentals.

The sheriff's office, serving a broader rural area, cannot prioritize Ketchum's specific needs the way a local department can. Local officers reflect and serve the community. Their loyalty is to Ketchum residents and leaders, not county-wide priorities. Daily exposure to the same residents fosters conflict resolution through diplomacy rather than heavy-handed enforcement.

A town police department can focus on anticipating problems before they escalate. Ketchum faces unique rhythms — heavy pedestrian traffic, seasonal tourist surges, ski and festival crowds, short-term rental issues. And adults and children who “have issues” from time to time that could deteriorate into dangerous for the individual and community requiring intervention of trained law enforcement.

A county sheriff's office, stretched across a broad rural area and accountable primarily to the sheriff and secondarily to Ketchum mayor and council, simply cannot prioritize Ketchum's specific needs to the same extent as local police can. Local officers reflect the community they serve. Their loyalty is to Ketchum residents and leaders, not to county-wide priorities or politics. Because they will continue seeing the same people day-to-day, they are more likely to resolve disputes through diplomacy rather than heavy-handed enforcement. This is the neighborly culture Ketchum is known for, and it should extend to policing — as it did prior to 2009.

4 Existing Assets and Operational Continuity

Most vehicles and other assets currently used by the sheriff for services in Ketchum are owned by the city. Restoring a local force reclaims these assets for direct community use, reducing startup costs and ensuring continuity. Cooperation with the sheriff's office can support a seamless transition.

5 Investing in Community Safety and Accountability

Ketchum residents value public safety and willingly invest in it. Direct local control of policing ensures programs reflect community priorities rather than regional ones. Transitioning back to city oversight need not result in significant cost increases, yet it strengthens accountability and responsiveness.

Bringing policing back under the direct control of the City of Ketchum represents a stronger commitment to community service and accountability. When law enforcement is integrated into city government, it ensures that programs and priorities reflect the specific values and needs of Ketchum's residents rather than being diluted by regional bureaucracy.

6 Local Control is Especially Critical for Essential Services

While local control is valuable for many aspects of governance, it is especially critical for essential services like policing, fire protection, and emergency response. These services directly affect life, safety, and community well-being. Centralizing control over such functions can slow response times, reduce accountability, and weaken trust between residents and those tasked with protecting them. By managing these services locally, Ketchum ensures decisions are made by people who understand the community's unique needs, are fully accountable to residents, and can act swiftly in emergencies.

7 The Benefits of Regionalization are Overstated

Proponents of regionalizing police services often argue that outsourcing daily policing to the county sheriff's office is more efficient and provides access to more sophisticated resources. These claims, however, are overstated and fail to account for the unique needs of a small mountain resort community like Ketchum.

First, any purported cost savings are largely illusory. Efficiency without effectiveness is meaningless. Public safety is not a line item to be optimized at the expense of responsiveness, accountability, and community trust. Ketchum residents are far better served by officers who live and work in the community, understand local concerns, and can respond immediately when incidents occur.

Specialized expertise, often cited as a reason for regionalization, does not require surrendering control over daily policing. For major crimes, SWAT deployment, cyber investigations, or forensic analysis, Ketchum can cooperate with Blaine County or state agencies while retaining its local force to handle everyday responsibilities.

Similarly, claims that regionalization avoids duplication overlook the reality that Ketchum has already invested in its own police assets. Using these assets locally ensures they serve the community directly rather than being absorbed into a county-wide pool.

Recruitment and retention are additional advantages of maintaining a local force. Ketchum's quality of life, natural beauty, and civic values attract dedicated officers who value stability and

community connection. A locally embedded police force fosters continuity, knowledge of the community, and non-adversarial relationships that cannot be replicated by officers who are assigned from outside the city.

Counterarguments favoring regionalization consistently fail to hold up under scrutiny. Any apparent financial savings are offset by slower response times, weaker accountability, and diminished community ties. While the county may possess specialized resources, these can be accessed on an as-needed basis without compromising local control. Arguments about consistency and standardization ignore the fact that professional standards can be maintained locally while training and procedures are tailored to Ketchum's unique environment.

In short, the supposed benefits of regionalization—efficiency, sophistication, avoidance of duplication, and consistency—are either overstated or can be achieved through cooperative arrangements. What cannot be outsourced is the responsiveness, accountability, and deep community engagement that define effective policing in Ketchum. Maintaining its own police force ensures that public safety is delivered by those who know and care for the community every day. Exclusive accountability

Many so-called “regional gains” have proven illusory, offering little real benefit while removing accountability from the citizens who fund and rely on these services. Restoring Ketchum's police department aligns with the American tradition of **checks and balances**, balancing local oversight against county and state authority, while maintaining direct responsibility for our community's safety.

8 Ongoing Relationship with Sheriff's Office

Restoring a local police department does not mean cutting ties with Blaine County. Ketchum can manage its own daily policing while maintaining cooperative arrangements for any large-scale or specialized incidents that may arise. Residents benefit from the intimacy and accountability of a local force, backed by regional support when necessary.

Ketchum has long valued the professional relationship and good work performed by the Blaine County Sheriff's Office. Officers and staff serving our town have done an excellent job, and we intend to maintain strong cooperative ties. Transitioning back to a city-controlled police department is not about severing those relationships. Rather, it is about reclaiming local control while continuing to collaborate effectively with the sheriff on specialized matters.

9 Ensuring Ethical Oversight and Accountability

Ketchum residents expect law enforcement that is accountable, competent, and trustworthy. While the Blaine County Sheriff's Office has provided professional service, ongoing questions regarding background, experience, and integrity of the office have created concern among citizens. These concerns have been heightened given the presence of an admitted thief on the city council, Mr. Hutchinson, who declines to apologize or resign, even while he awaits resolution of his criminal affair.

Restoring a city-controlled police force allows Ketchum to more closely ensure ethical oversight and operational integrity. Local leadership and supervision reduce the risk of outside influences or unresolved concerns compromising public trust. This is not a critique of the officers currently serving the town from the sheriff's office, but a recognition that ultimate accountability and ethical standards are strongest when the city directly manages its own essential services.

The Ketchum public appreciates the past services of the sheriff and staff and their cooperation in bringing about this orderly transition.

10 Call to Action

Restoring Ketchum's police department is not merely a matter of preference—it is a matter of public safety, community trust, and civic responsibility.

We respectfully urge the City Council to act decisively and implement the transition plan by January 1, 2026, ensuring that Ketchum residents once again benefit from a police force that is local, accountable, and more fully aligned with our community's character.

Jim Hungelmann

Ketchum